When I started school at the University of Michigan, I knew I was interested in computer programming, design, and entrepreneurship. As I started to explore the campus, I realized that the school was full of people with exactly the same mindset. I quickly joined an entrepreneurship group on campus, called MPowered, where I met some of my best friends and made valuable connections for potential jobs. Outside of class, I began to work on side projects with some fellow computer science and engineering students to develop ideas we had for iPhone apps or websites. These side projects, complemented by Michigan’s rigorous engineering coursework, helped me and my friends land great internships at top start-up companies in San Francisco after only our freshman year.

Many of the great opportunities you’ll discover in college will take you beyond the campus. In fact, many fellowship programs in computer science and technology are made available only to college students and are specifically designed to help students further their education and gain real-world experience. Last summer, for example, I applied and was selected for a Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers Engineering Fellowship. This allowed me to meet and work with students with similar interests from universities across the country, including Harvard, MIT, and Stanford. For three months, we shared ideas and worked on projects together, combining our skills to build products both for the start-ups where we worked and for our own projects on the side.

During this time, I realized that many people I respected in the tech industry are very open to meeting with college students to give advice and just share ideas. This gave me the confidence to send emails to tech founders and prominent engineers whom I respected, such as Evan Doll, the founder of Flipboard, and Evan Williams, cofounder of Twitter, and I was able to meet and talk with many of them. These meetings were incredibly valuable, and although they didn’t take place on the university campus, I consider them part of my college experience.

When I returned for my sophomore year at Michigan, I was determined to expand my network of students who are interested in tech and startups. One of the best ways I found to do this was through campus-sponsored hackathons—24-hour (or longer) programming sessions where small teams build websites, apps, or other types of software, often competing for prizes or internships. Although intense, hackathons are awesome because they allow you to apply the skills you learn in classes, work on a team in a stressful situation, and meet other talented students. Moreover, companies love to hire interns and full-time employees who have built and maintained a number of side projects, and hackathons offer a chance to create this portfolio. This past school year, I participated in two of the largest student hackathons: first, as part of a team of 50 Michigan students who traveled to the University of Pennsylvania for a two-day event called PennApps, and second, at a huge student hackathon at Michigan called MHacks. For both competitions, students flew in from schools as far away as UC-Berkeley, Stanford, and UCLA to attend. It was inspiring to be around so many driven students who were working on projects they are passionate about. And to top it off, nearly all my friends who built something at one of these events landed a well-paid internship this summer.

In college, it is vital to work hard on your academics, but it is also extremely important to open yourself to all the opportunities you have as a college student. These outside experiences will remind you why you are putting in all those long hours working and studying, and they will ultimately provide the extra advantage you will need to succeed after college.

Andrew Rauh is a sophomore at the University of Michigan, where he is studying computer science. He will be working at Apple this summer as a Mac/iOS software engineering intern. Previously, Andrew was a Kleiner Perkins engineering fellow and interned at Path and Detroit Labs.